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.H18 N3
1916a
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Nazareth: a Morality in One Act: by Laurence Housman

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By LAURENCE HOUSMAN

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NAZARETH.

PROLOGUE.

Since Love first looked on life with human eyes,
Twixt him and us time like a curtain lies.
Of all the years while He made life His own
With dear familiar touch—how little's known!
The gospels of His Birth, the tale make plain
Then two years till He died and rose again,
Naught else remains to us of all, save when
He, at Jerusalem, with learned men
Was by His parents found, and taken thence
Back to far Nazareth. And by no sense
Of mortal mind from where they now lie hid
Can we recover the fair things He did,
Growing to man's estate, that He might die
For man's salvation; hidden there they lie,
The days which mounted up to Calvary.

Yet here on earth that lovely deed was done;
Love in man's form took life from wind and sun,
Waked, slept, ate bread and toiled, and without
speed,
Patient, made test of each frail weak human need;
Found means on small frail feet men's ways to go;
From mother tongue was taught man's speech to
know;
So, for man's making, childhood, boyhood, youth,
Each he endowed in turn with deathless truth,
Himself the type and pattern for each stage
Of human growth. Oh! in what future age
Shall we who, seeking that lost Pattern, roam,
Find it again, and to that form come home?

Ah, friend! this simple showing that ye see
Of Love at Nazareth, this is not He!
'Tis but a thought, a fathering wish, a prayer
That with hearts knit we may come closelier there,
Where He lived lowly. Lo, He by your side
Lies hidden, a waiting guest, still multiplied
By man's still growing needs,—with such intent
He made humanity His Sacrament;
The flesh and blood, which here we beat and bruise,
Is Christ's. Ah, put it to some better use!
Be members all with all! Hear what Love saith,
And make your home with Him at Nazareth!

NAZARETH

SCENE:—The *Carpenter's shop is a low, broad chamber built of wood. At the back to the left-center a wide open doorway reveals a level stretch of landscape. It is late afternoon, but the air is still pale with the heat of day. To the right of the door is a small square window with wooden shutters thrown wide; before it stands a carpenter's bench upon which lies a wooden door frame nearly finished. The carpenter and his assistant are quietly at work planing, and boring holes for the fitting in of the rivets; beneath them the floor is strewn with shavings, saw-dust, and odds and ends of wood. Away to the left, near a spinning wheel, sits an aged woman combing flax. Against the wall to the same side of the doorway sits* MARY, *the carpenter's wife, with a book upon her knees; on the other side her son stands against the door-post, with his back to the interior, looking out into the sunshine.*

After the scene has opened the carpenter raises himself from a stooping position, and hands over to REUBEN, *his assistant, a beam of wood. which the latter lays aside.*

CARPENTER. 'Twill soon be done. Nay, we'll not need that now. Yes, speak on. If you read slowly enough, I can give heed.

MARY. (*Reading*) "Because his visage was so marred, many did marvel at him then, for more

than most his form was scarred, yea, more than all the sons of men. Yet him shall all the nations hear, and kings shall shut their mouths for fear."

CARPENTER. (*To* REUBEN) Be careful, now the cross-beam's laid.

OLD ANNA. What cause have kings to be afraid?

MARY. (*Reading*) "Who hath believed our report? To whom is the Lord's arm revealed? He shall grow up in tender sort, and as a root from a dry field, having no form nor comeliness, that men who see should scorn him less."

CARPENTER. Hold it fast, now! Nay, don't let go.

MARY.—

"He is rejected and despised,
A man of sorrows, grief his lot,
He came to us unrecognized,
Despising, we esteemed him not.
Surely our sorrows he hath borne,
And for our sins hath felt the rod,
Wherefore he seemed a shape for scorn——
One smitten by the hand of God.
But he was wounded for our sins,
For our iniquities was scourged,
By chastisement our peace he wins,
And with his strips mankind is purged.
All we like sheep have gone astray,
Turned everyone to his own way.
And upon him the Lord doth lay
The iniquity of all."

(OLD ANNA *touches her daughter, and points toward the child.*)

MARY. (*After a pause, watching him*)
My son, what yonder dost thou see,
That holds thy gaze so steadfastly?
Come hither, child, and tell it me.

CHILD.—

I see the land all parched and dry,
And sheep, without a shepherd nigh,
And surely some look like to die.
ANNA. I see no sheep.
MARY.—
Nay, dearest one.
Thine eyes are dazzled by the sun;
See, in the field thy playmates run,
Wilt thou not join them?
CHILD.—
Mother, nay!
I will not go with them to-day.
ANNA. He never was a child for play.
CHILD. Mother, what were you reading then?
MARY.—
Isaiah's prophecy how men
Shall still be blind when God again
Comes to save Zion and redeem
His chosen ones.
CHILD. Was it a dream?
Or did he see? How did he know?
MARY. He heard God's word, and told men so.
CHILD. And was that many years ago?
MARY. Seven hundred years.
CHILD.—
But having here
His word to guide them, do men fear
They will not see Salvation near?
ANNA. Aye! many fear it. I for one.
CARPENTER. There, that's right! Now, 'tis almost done.

(*The child turns towards the carpenter's bench*)
MARY. Thou will not miss that sight, my son.
CARPENTER.—
Come, little son, and hold the wood!
Brace hard the end, while I make good
The upright. See how crooked it stood!

CHILD. What art thou making, father?
CARPENTER.—
Nay,
See for thyself, my child, what way
One grows to wisdom day by day.
It is a door.

(REUBEN *goes and takes a cup, dips it in a bowl of water near the door and drinks.*)
CHILD. Whose door?
CARPENTER.
Why, mine,
Till I'm paid for it!
CHILD. How came it thine?
CARPENTER. I made it.
CHILD. How?
CARPENTER.—
Well, first I bought
The timber; after that I wrought,
Rough hewed and shaped it, leaving nought
To chance—so that all parts agree
When joined together. Dost thou see?
Art satisfied?
CHILD. (*After a pause*) Who made the tree?
CARPENTER. (*After a pause*) God made the tree, my son.
CHILD.—
And through
Long years it put forth leaf, and grew
In beauty till man came and slew.

(*He caresses the wood, laying his face upon it*)

CARPENTER. Strange fancies still!
CHILD.—
And so the tree
Died, and gave up its life to be
A door through which man passes free,

To work God's will.

CARPENTER.—

Come, come, you waste
Your father's time, my son! Make haste,
Reuben—we've got the lintel placed;
Bring me the nails.

REUBEN. (*As he brings the nails and drives them in. Sings*)

Oh, what is yon tree that stands so high
And stretches its arms in sorrow?
"Oh, that is the gallows where I must die,
Where I must die to-morrow."

Oh, what hast thou done, my only son,
That thou shouldst die to-morrow?
"My life I lend to a well-loved friend
Who health of me would borrow."

If so thou lend to a well-loved friend,
How heavy must be his sorrow!
"Ah, say not so, for well I know
I hang by his hand to-morrow."

(*The child has taken the bag of nails from* REUBEN, *and hands them to him, one by one, as he drives them in. One of the nails pierces the child's palm. He bows his head over it.*)

CARPENTER.—

Why, there, there, there! You've done it now!
Reuben, 'twas your fault to allow
A little child like him to play
With anything so sharp as they!

(MARY *comes forward and kneels by the child's side. She takes his hand and tries to staunch the blood*)

Has it gone far?

MARY.—
The wound is deep.
Stay, I will bind it! See you keep
Your hand up, child. Quick, mother, bring
Yon water fresh-drawn from the spring ,
To wash it clean, for there was rust.

(ANNA *brings the water bowl, while* REUBEN *draws forward a low bench at one end of which she sets it down*)

Maybe, upon the iron, or dust
To cause a festering in the wound.

(MARY *bathes his hand and binds it. The child closes his eyes and sinks against her breast.*)

ANNA.—
Oh! See, he has already swooned
For loss of blood.
MARY.—
Nay, nay, 'tis sleep!
Aye! saw you not how at the leap
Of first sharp pain his face lit up,
And how he bowed as to a cup
His lips, and drained it to the lees?
So to this spirit now comes ease
And rest; for surely here he tastes
Of that dark vintage of the wastes
Whereto, for mortal need, he hastes.
CARPENTER. Strange words!
MARY.—
But stranger than all words
The peace which holds him now and herds
My lamb's life with the blessed dead.

(*She moves to lay him along the bench.* ANNA *spreads a cloak across it*)

Lift off the bowl, and let his head
Rest so, even so.
CARPENTER.—
There! Let him lie
Quiet awhile. Ah! he won't die
Of that!

(*He lays his hand kindly upon his wife, then turns away. Evening has begun to close in*)

Now, Reuben, you and I
Must stir while daylight yet allows!
This door is for the High-Priest's house,
And should already be in its place
For now Passover comes apace;
And last night they sent word to say
'Twas to be up before the day,
So that the lintel beam might bear
The blood-marks for the coming year.
MARY. Look! There are stains already there!
CARPENTER. I'll wash them off!
MARY.—
Nay, let them stay!
This blood, I trow, was shed to-day
To take some mortal's guilt away.
(*The two men have lifted the door and set it to stand against the middle post of the doorway where it makes the form of three crosses standing together.*)

CARPENTER.—
Soon through this door the holy feet
Of Caiaphas in service met
Shall pass each day to do God's will.
MARY.—
And, what he hath ordained, fulfill.
And some day they shall bring a Lamb
And slay, and lo, upon the jamb

And lintel of this self-same door,
Where blessed blood has been before,
More blessed blood shall then be spilt
To take from Caiaphas his guilt.

(*The men having put away their tools lift the door and carry it away.*)

ANNA. (*Reading*) "He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people was he smitten . And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth."

(*Voices of water-carriers heard without.*)

1ST ANTIPHON. The bows of the mighty men are broken.

2ND ANTIPHON. And they that stumbled are girded with strength.

1ST ANTIPHON. They that were full have hired themselves for bread.

2ND ANTIPHON. And they that were hungry have ceased.

(*The women pass by.*)

1ST ANTIPHON. So that the barren hath born seven.

2ND ANTIPHON. And she that hath many children is waxed feeble.

1ST ANTIPHON.—
The Lord killeth, and maketh alive.
He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up.

2ND ANTIPHON. The Lord maketh poor and maketh rich. He bringeth low and lifteth up.

MARY. It is the women going to the well.

ANNA. What are they singing?
MARY.—
Of the joy that fell.
To Anna for her first-born, Samuel.
ANNA. And thy joy also!
MARY. And the pain as well!
1ST ANTIPHON. He raiseth the poor out of the dust.
2ND. ANTIPHON. And lifeth up the beggar from the dunghill.
1ST ANTIPHON. To set them among the princes.
2ND ANTIPHON. And to make them inherit the throne of glory.
1ST ANTIPHON. He will keep the feet of his saints.
2ND ANTIPHON. And the wicked shall be silent in darkness.
1ST ANTIPHON. For by strength shall no man prevail.
2ND ANTIPHON. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces.

(*The voices pass away. It begins to grow dark.*)

ANNA. (*Sings as she winds her flax*)
Little child, lo, I spin
Flax to clothe thy body in;
Little child, do not grieve
Out of this a cloth I'll weave,
Make of it a little shirt,——
What man shall do thee hurt?
So while it lasts, wear it still,
What man shall wish thee ill?
Do not from thy body strip
This; 'tis human fellowship.

(*She lays the cloth over the child*)
MARY.—

When thou to death art bowed
This web shall be thy shroud.
So in fellowship with all
Thy soul shall meet God's call,
Oh, then, may my soul, too,
Wake and see the darkness through
And my ears, no longer bound,
List, to the heavenly sound!

(*A pause.* ANNA *lights a small lamp. As she goes to place it in the window she stops. Its light falls on the sleeping child*)

MARY.—
See, from his face has passed the pain.
And every sense of heart and brain
Is gathered unto rest again.
O son, O child, while round thy sleep
The peace of God lies folded deep,
Thou can'st not hear thy mother weep.
Oh, me, the anguish and the dread
Of that dark hour which lies ahead
When I shall see thee lying dead.
Clay, cold, and all my cares undone!
O perfect, pure, and stainless one,
My son, my own, my little son.
(*A sound of sheep passing is heard. A shepherd stops at the door, and looks in. He draws off his hat.*)

SHEPHERD. God's peace be in this house. (*He goes on his way*)

ANNA. Again!

MARY. Who spoke?

ANNA.—
The shepherd from the plain,
The stranger, so last night he came
And stayed to greet us in God's name,

Then went.
MARY.—
And there were others, too,
Who also stayed.

(*A stranger passes the door.*)

STRANGER. Peace be with you!
MARY. God give you peace. (*She rises and turns*)
ANNA. Nay, he is gone.
MARY.—
Oh, strange! And more will come anon,
And each one turning from his way,
Wilt halt here at the door to say
Some word, or show by look or sign
That here peace dwells!

(*Enter an old man.*)

OLD MAN.—
Yes, peace is thine!
I would I would to God, such peace were mine.

(*Enter a little child, led by its mother. The little one kneels beside the bench where the other child is laid.*)

LITTLE CHILD.—
Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child,
Pity my simplicity,
And suffer me to come to thee!
(*Th mother lifts the little one from its knee and carries it away.*)

OLD MAN. (*Weeping, he stands in the child's place*)
I'm an old sinner, oft have I gone the road

Of mine own will, so now I bear the load;
And in my body grief has come to pass!
Surely, the preacher saith, all flesh is grass,
And goodliness the flower of the field.
Lo, the wind passeth, and its day is o'er,
And in his place man's name is known no more.
God give us peace.

(*He kneels. While he speaks others have entered. The scene has grown dark. One of the men carries a lantern*)

1ST MAN. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever.

2ND MAN. Son of God, shine on us!

(*All kneel.*)

3RD MAN. Lamb of God, look on us!

4TH MAN. Shepherd of men, set thy sign on us!

5TH MAN. And lay thy yoke on us!

1ST MAN. And we will be thankful.

(*The moon rises. Outside the door, others are seen kneeling: men, women and children.*)

ALL. Hail, Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee! Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb: Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

(*One by one the men rise and go out. The crowd outside also disappears.* ANNA *goes and closes the door, and the shutter of the window. The house is flooded with moonlight.* MARY *kneels at the head of the sleeping child. Voices are heard singing.*)

VOICES.—

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum!
Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et Benedictus
Frustus ventris tui, Jesus!

CURTAIN.

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